

# The Great Kuddly Kub Plan

by Louis Walter Woods

*Louis Walter Woods is a gifted American writer who here for the first time turns his hand to intergenerational love and attraction. The seed for this story, he tells us, was the picture in a local newspaper of a boy who had gained a championship at a regional athletic event (we won't tell which sport). As the writer was examining the boy's photo he "suddenly got the idea of purposeful 'misdialing' (the telephone) as a gimmick to meet a boy." From there the story more or less wrote itself.*

KEITH PROPELLED HIMSELF through the supermarket, searching for the boys who had entered a few seconds earlier. *Be careful! Take it easy!* he admonished himself, as he always did when these rare opportunities came. Always that danger that he might reveal his covert yearnings by careless actions. Careening around the end of an aisle, almost bumping into them, he momentarily halted. *Stop being an idiot!* he almost muttered. *Play it cool, detached, don't let them suspect anything!* Abruptly Keith assumed nonchalance and a slower gait, moved several yards down the aisle and stopped, pretended an interest in some shelved items while he discreetly observed the foursome. They carried already-selected cans of soft drinks and loudly quibbled over their choices of snack foods. *Average kids, but not, WOW!, not the shirtless one. How I'd like to know him. Impossible dream... but I've got to find a way!*

The smallest was different, entirely captivating Keith in the way he twisted/squirmed/cavorted/pranced, trying to gain attention from the others who seemed determined to ignore him. He wore his grey sweat pants low on his haunches, and his nude torso revealed to Keith the kind of

boy-perfection immortalized in Greek statuary. *How can the others be so indifferent to his beauty? This bundle of boyish charm is so powerful that I can feel my legs tremble!* Keith prayed that his chest's inner vibrations wouldn't surface in his expression. His mind lectured his smitten heart, tried to convince his emotions that any eventual liaison with the boy was hopeless. The conflict exasperated him. He *had* to know this boy.

The shirtless boy tried to worm his way into the cluster they formed before a display rack, but one of the others yelled, "Lay off, Key! We're paying for it, we get to choose."

The youth jumped back, looked hurt, but immediately his eyes twinkled as an impish grin spread across his face. "All right, but don't blame me if you get the undisrecomjobulated stuff!"

Startled, the trio turned towards him, but the boy's expression betrayed his joke. "Cut it out, shrimp," one of them ordered. "Always trying to be the big shot!"

The boys finished their selections. Keith quickly turned to the shelf before they passed behind him as they headed for the checkout. His trepidation intensified. *Should I tag along after him? Would it be too obvious?* Then, abandoning caution, he snatched at random a small carton from the shelf as he turned to follow them.

A lone shopper at the checkout was removing groceries from her cart. The boys jostled each other as they tried to enter the narrow aisle, and with their boisterous banter showed no concern for the attention they attracted to themselves. Keith stood close but pretended to ignore the commotion.

"Hey, stop shoving!" The biggest boy emphasized his command by pushing the smaller boy to the rear—and right into Keith. The shove, harder than intended, threw Keith off balance on impact. He dropped the box, grasped the boy around the waist and threw his other arm over the boy's chest, bending over and pulling him towards himself so they

both wouldn't collapse. Keith could smell the fresh fragrance of the boy's hair as his lips brushed against his head. *My God! Keith thought, I almost kissed him!* Then, while righting himself, he pulled one hand firmly over the boy's chest while sliding the other across his lower abdomen and hip. The boy regained his balance and spun around towards Keith. *Why such panic? His eyes wide open, yet he's afraid to look up. If only he would, I could smile at him. Is he ashamed? Confused?*

"Sorry," the boy offered. The others began to snicker.

"Okay, kiddo. No problem." *How can I get to know him if I remind him of his embarrassment? The initiator of the push turned away and smirked, pretended to be innocent of his mischief. Callous kid,* Keith growled inwardly, *don't you know this poor kid has feelings?* Keith wanted to comfort him, yet he tried to appear composed while his mind and heart continued their battle.

The tallest boy pointed to the carton on the floor. "Pick it up, nerd!" They all laughed at the younger boy's distress.

The boy retrieved it for Keith and declined his head even more. "Sorry..."

"Yeah, no problem," was all Keith could muster, while cursing himself for his inability to think of something to say which might help the youth. He noticed the color deepen in the boy's face. The others made cavalier comments about the boy's clumsiness—Keith was certain he heard them again refer to him as "Key"—but the boy hooked his thumbs into the back of his togs and inadvertently—Keith assumed—pushed them down. Slowly he moved his arms forward as if they were heavy weights until his thumbs met again at his front. This brief action exposed a swath of new skin all around the boy, but he seemed oblivious to the consequence. *How subdued he is, after his former effervescence. Strange, the results of embarrassment! But how wonderful to have him here, right before me....*

*And take your time, take your time,* he silently prayed. *I*

*hope that woman hoards groceries. He's so close....* He surveyed the boy's smooth shoulders, down his lightly tanned back to the newly appeared light stripe now exposed above the pant tops. Because of the loose material or weakened elastic, Keith believed that the boy's sweat pants customarily migrated lower, but now they clung so low that they revealed the start of the division between his nates. *No underpants on this boy! On second thought, that woman had better hurry. I'm not sure I can restrain from hugging this bewitching sorcerer again.* Keith's agitated heart urged **TOUCH!** His stern mind ordered **STOP!**

The woman departed with her groceries. The boys dumped the crackers, chips, and sodas on the counter, and the clerk began to ring them up. "Key," Keith noted, no longer seemed part of the group. Still silent, he had turned diffidently to the counter, and as he hovered over him Keith sensed that the boy tried to avoid looking back at him. What Keith now saw startled him: the boy had pushed his pant tops down so far that his thumbs nestled on either side of his genitals! It amazed Keith that the boy lost awareness of his actions. Suddenly Keith stiffened—others might notice his staring! He shifted his eyes.

Their purchases completed, the bigger boys turned to leave. The last one told "Key" to carry the bag. The boy gave a start as he seemed to revive from a trance and with a quick motion hoisted his pants to their normal position. As his arms encircled the bag he hesitated for a second, almost looked back, but finally he lifted it and trailed the others at a short distance.

Keith placed his carton on the counter and tried unobtrusively to look outside the store to see where the boys had gone. The clerk couldn't remember the price of the item, had to ask another clerk, and took still longer to change the twenty-dollar bill Keith offered her. When Keith finally got outside, the boys had disappeared.

ON THE FOURTH RING, Donn answered. "Donn, it's Keith. Guess what happened today?"

Donn admitted ignorance.

"In less than four minutes, I had the most extraordinary encounter with a boy."

"Not *again*! Keith, you called me two hundred miles to tell me that?"

"No, listen. I went to my Mom's today to show her my new camping van—yes, the one I said I might get—and on the way home decided, on a whim, to go through Kenter."

"Where's that?" Donn's voice betrayed disinterest.

"Oh, about ten or twelve miles from Newbury. Don't interrupt—you'll like this. Anyway, just as I was passing though the town, I saw four kids go into the small supermarket. Small town, small market. So, I made a U-turn, parked right in front of the store next to their bikes, and went in. Now for the amazing part....," and he recounted his glorious experience.

Donn's interest blossomed. "You say the whole thing transpired in less than four minutes?"

"Yes. After I got back to my van, I couldn't drive. I just sat there and trembled. I kept seeing the glow of his skin, kept feeling the softness of his belly and the muscles in his chest, kept breathing the sweetness of his black tousled hair. He seemed about twelve." Even in its retelling, Keith relived the ecstasy. "And Donn, another couple of things. To have a partial tan this early—first week in June—means he must not like to wear shirts much. Tell me, do you think he was trying to be seductive, pushing his pants down like that?"

Donn's voice was even. "Keith, kids are notoriously unconscious of their behaviors. He was embarrassed, that's all. You always do that—interpret the most innocent things to please yourself. He may use a tanning lamp at home, or has been outside a lot during this sunny spring. You did say that school was nearby. Did it ever occur to you that they had just finished some after-school sporting activity and

were hot—”

“He sure made me hot!”

“—and didn’t bother to dress, but stopped in the store because they were hungry?”

“Well Donn, I’m going back next week to look for him.”

Donn laughed. “Then what? If you get near him, you’ll say, ‘My name is Keith the Boy-lover, will you be my special friend’? Phooey! You know how kids are today, constantly taught to fear strangers. Do you think he would recognize you?”

“I don’t know. He really didn’t look straight at me....”

“Well then, there you are. If he does recognize you, he’ll wonder why you’re seeking him out. ‘Lurking around’ is the expression, I believe. If your face draws a blank, you’re a total stranger, and you’ll have no legitimate reason to speak to him. My advice is to forget him.”

Keith was adamant. “If I got close I could remind him that I was there the previous week and ask him how he was doing....”

“Big deal. Then he’d say, ‘Fine. Now buzz off, buster, or I call the cops!’ ”

“Sorry, Donn. I’ve just got to go back. I may never see him again, of course. I’ve been hit by such flukes before. But they can’t arrest me for driving around and looking. I need someone to share my van for camping and trips. Who knows? Lady Luck may smile on me.”

“Remember too, you naive optimist, she may frown. Be careful. Don’t get your hopes too high.”

“Ah, I forgot! The omen! I have an omen. Remember the carton I snatched from the shelf to have a reason to stand in the checkout line? I didn’t look at it until I got home. It’s a box of ‘Kuddly Kub Kookies’. I’ll never open it. I have it enshrined on a shelf in my bedroom now. That boy will be my Kuddly Kub. Kuddly Kub Key. Could be my ‘key’ to love!”

“Some pun! Keith, you’re *impossible*. Good luck. There’s

a lot of malicious people out there.”

“Thanks, Donn. I’ll keep in touch.”

SEVEN DAYS LATER Keith spent some hours driving around Kenter in a late spring rain. The pilgrimage proved futile.

The following weekend, though, Keith was back on the phone. “Donn, things are looking up. I’ve got two things to report. First is that I found out his name.”

“Amazing! How’d you do that?”

“I really didn’t do anything. I receive this freebie newspaper every week. It’s called the *Courier-Advisor* and it’s mailed to every address in the county. It’s usually filled with ads and bits of local news, and I seldom do more than glance at its pages. So, what did I find on page five this week—”

“What? Get on with it.”

“His picture!”

“No kidding! Doing what?”

“He’s on, or was on, the junior swim team. It showed a picture of the team and their trophies, just after a ‘finals’ meet.”

“Appropriately dressed, I hope.”

“Yup. They all had on some of the neatest little swimsuits I’ve seen in this part of the world. Seems that the paper neglected to print the item at the end of the season in May, and the school lets out this coming week so I guess they felt they better get it in late. Kenny got a trophy, too, for first place in the backstroke.”

“Kenny, I presume, is—”

“Key. McKee. His name is Kenny McKee. Now I know why they called him Kee. I thought it was his last name, and I had looked up K-E-Y in the phone book and found nothing. But there are three ‘McKeys’ listed in Kenter.”

“That’s something to go on, but it doesn’t solve your problem of how to get acquainted.”

“Ha!” Keith was jubilant. “I’ve got a *PLAN*! First, let me tell you what else happened. Today I was driving around the

town, up a hill, when suddenly over a knoll ahead Kenny appeared—this time in shorts, still shirtless—riding his bike pell-mell down the hill. Just after we passed each other he braked and spun around.”

“To look at you?”

“I don’t know. I suppose I’d like to think so.”

Donn sighed. “Here we go again....”

“Just afterwards three other kids his size zoomed by and joined him, one of them dressed just like Kenny. I had moved further on, of course, but then I could no longer see them in the mirror as the road dipped.”

Donn again assumed his mock sarcasm. “Then you turned around and tore after him and yelled, ‘Here I am, Kenny!’?”

“No way! It happened so fast it surprised me—even though I was looking for him—so I did the safe thing and kept going. But I can’t help wondering why he spun around so fast.”

“Seems like everything he does is unexpected. Can’t you see? He was doing what kids do best—fooling around, showing off his speed to his friends, that he could condescend to stop and let them catch up. Why would he recognize your van? Because it’s red with orange and yellow stripes and green polka-dots?”

Keith considered this for a moment, then chuckled. “Only light blue, Donn. You’re right. There’s no reason why he should recognize the van, or even me driving it. We did whiz by each other. But here’s something of significance—his bike also is blue. A blue ten-speed racer. It must mean something.”

“And I think you qualify as the most superstitious person I know—”

“I can’t help it. I keep believing there’s some great plan unfolding.”

“—and a mystic as well. Now, you said *you* had a plan, yourself. No offense to the ‘great plan!’” He chuckled as he

spoke.

Keith outlined his carefully crafted scheme. Donn was sceptical. He had witnessed too many of Keith's foibles.

"Keith! That's crazy!"

"I'm undeterred, Donn. A few more days to consider it, get up some courage, and then I'll try it. I've got nothing to loose."

Donn sounded serious now. "I think it'll fail, but I have to admire your efforts. Only wish I had something like that to give me some hope. It's been a long time since I've had a young friend around here...."

"Sorry, Donn. I know. Maybe something will turn up sometime."

"Sure. Do something for me, huh?"

"What?"

"Say 'hello' to Kenny for me."

Keith laughed. Donn really did wish him well.

KEITH SAT AND STARED at his telephone for an hour before he finally summoned enough courage to make the call. He carefully dialed the number, mentally rehearsing for the thousandth time what he would do and say. If someone else answered, he would hang up. If Kenny did answer, he would stay calm, friendly, alert to every nuance in their conversation—and if nothing came of it, Kenny would never know who called. But now his hand trembled and Keith wondered if his nervousness would cause his voice to betray him. His mouth tasted dry as old mold.

He heard the phone ring. Once. Twice. By the third ring Keith's terror increased and he almost hung up. Then someone answered.

"Hello."

*It is Kenny!* "Hello! This Kenny?"

"Yeah..."

"This is your uncle." Keith hurried on. "I thought I would call to congratulate you on your winning a swimming

trophy. Your mom wrote me about it."

"Uh... thanks. You said Mom *wrote*?"

"Sure, told me all about it." *Moving right along now....*  
"She also asked me if I still plan to take you on that canoe trip to Canada this summer. As far as I know, it's on."

"Who *is* this?" Keith detected his puzzlement.

"Your uncle. Uncle Keith."

"I don't have an 'Uncle Keith'."

"Hey! Isn't this Kenny?"

"Yeah.... What number did you dial?"

Keith told the boy the number.

"I think you made a mistake. This is area code 716, not 617. Uh..., you're not calling from around here?"

"Oh no! No! From Scranton. In Pennsylvania. I thought I had dialed my nephew in Worcester, Massachusetts. Where's area code 716?" Keith prayed that he could keep the conversation going.

"In western New York State. At least that's where I am, in a dinky little village called Kenter."

"That's some coincidence, your name being Kenny too!"

"Well, sorry you wasted your money, calling all that way to get a wrong number."

Keith's heart knotted. He knew the boy was about to hang up—probably wanted to get back to television—but he couldn't now think of what else to say. "That's okay, kiddo. No problem. I'll just re-dial."

"Oh, wait a minute. Uh..., did you say this other Kenny won a swimming trophy?"

"Why, yes, he's on a school swim team, junior team, I think." Keith's heart unknotted and did a flip-flop.

"No kidding! So am I! I also won a trophy. *My* picture they put in the paper, too. What's his best stroke?"

Keith quickly reviewed his sports knowledge. "His mother didn't say. The breast stroke, possibly. I don't know too much about competitive swimming."

"You probably mean butterfly. I do racing backstroke,

mainly. Do you like to play games?"

"Huh?" The question startled Keith.

"Games. Sometimes do you like to play games? I mean like chess, or mind games, or figuring out puzzles—things like that?"

"Why ask me that?"

"Well..., my sister an' I were just playing with a puzzle with ball bearings an' slots. It's fun. I just wondered if you like games."

"Well, yes... sure I do." Keith could scarcely believe this. The boy seemed to be devising more conversation. *Could it be that he does need someone to talk to?*

"I can read minds sometimes. Mom says I've got extra-sensory perception. Want me to read yours?"

Keith was intrigued by the boy's capriciousness. "If there's no charge, yes, but beware!—my mind's pretty gross."

The boy snorted with merriment. In the next few minutes, feigning great concentration, he guessed Keith's age to be thirty, that he was unmarried, that he drove a van, that it was brown. Before Keith could respond, he asked, "Want me to tell you about me an' this town?"

*Yes, yes, yes*, thought Keith. *Tell, tell, tell, talk all night if you want to!* "Sure, go ahead. First, though, three of your guesses were right, but I won't tell you the wrong one. You'll have to figure it out yourself."

"Wow! That's pretty good, huh?" For the next half hour the boy told Keith more about Kenter than he ever suspected he wanted to know. He especially loved every precious syllable the boy uttered about himself, his swim team, his school, his family. Finally, Kenny apologized for talking so long on a long distance call.

"No problem, Kenny. I enjoyed it."

"Would you call me again? I mean, sometime after you talk with your nephew an' tell him about the coincidences? He sure is lucky to be able to go on a canoe trip. Where'd you

say you were going?"

Keith was dumbfounded. His head floated in boy heaven, his body slumped on his couch, his hand held a death-grip on the phone. "Oh, uh... Algonquin Provincial Park, up in Ontario. It's pretty wild, lot of lakes, rivers, forests." Keith hoped his precise answer made his fiction seem valid. "And I sure will call again. You're nice to talk with!" *I hope I didn't sound too acquiescent*, he thought.

"Great! Saturday maybe, huh? I'll be waiting for it. So long."

For a moment after the boy hung up Keith remained still, stunned. Then he jumped up, flailing his arms, kicking his legs, bending, squealing, shouting—as he tried to release the enormous pressure that had built up inside him. After he calmed sufficiently, he called Donn and detailed the news.

Donn remained silent throughout. Then: "I'm astonished! How'd you find his number?"

"His bike. I checked each house listed under 'McKee' in the phone book and the bike was on his porch. The hardest part was to generate enough courage to dial his number. But I'm puzzled, Donn. How would he guess so accurately three things about me?"

"He's smart. If you go canoeing you probably like camping and trips, so possibly you've a camper van—also good to carry a canoe on. If you're into those things—and also planning a trip with a nephew—it means you don't have a wife to hound you. And you have to be old enough to have a good job to afford a van and canoeing and camping equipment. That 'thirty' is a nice round number. You're only twenty-nine. The camper's color he couldn't 'figure out'."

Keith admitted that he was right. "If he asks for my address and phone number next week, can I give him yours? I doubt he ever would call, but if he did you could say I was out but will call back. Then you could call to let me know."

"You're probably jumping the gun on this, but why not? You've achieved great success so far."

"One more question—why do you think he got talking so much?"

"He's lonely, at least for some kind of recognition. Remember how those kids ignored him at the store? You said he doesn't have a father, and you were a man willing to take time with him."

"Yeah..., I suppose you're right, and that bodes well for me, I guess...."

"Have you thought of how you're going to meet him, since he thinks you live here in Scranton?"

"I'm working on it. I'll tell you next week. Now I've got to go out and run around the block to work off my tension—about twenty times ought to do it!"

THAT FRIDAY EVENING Keith surveyed himself in a mirror before he left Newbury. His disguise consisted of a worn plaid shirt, dingy sheepskin vest, and an old wide-brimmed fishing cap which would partially hide his face. Kenny had mentioned it and Keith had confirmed it by checking the *Courier-Advisor*: free summer family movies each Friday at the Kenter Town Square. That night's offering was cartoons followed by *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*.

Keith arrived early. He parked along one side of the square and found a place to sit in the assemblage of folding chairs. After more people arrived he realized that most of them had brought blankets and pillows and chose to sit on the ground in front. He was in the "old folks" section! On the other side of the park were several refreshment stands run by the Rotary Club.

As twilight deepened, Keith feared he wouldn't spot Kenny. Eventually he saw him off to one side. The boy carried a blanket, wandered among clusters of people, and peered all around. He wore only his shorts and footwear. *Is he looking for someone?* Keith wondered. He felt almost paralyzed as he watched the boy, remembering how he had talked so long with him a few days before. When the cartoons

began Kenny moved to the far edge of the crowd and near the front, and during the movie Keith saw him frequently turn back to scan the audience in the screen's reflected light, still searching.

During the intermission Keith stood in line to buy popcorn and hot chocolate. When the feature re-started he no longer saw Kenny in his prior place, so now it was his turn to scan the crowd. He thought it would be easy to sight the only shirtless boy, but he had vanished.

THE NEXT NIGHT Kenny picked up the phone before Keith scarcely had heard it ring. The boy was exuberant.

"Hi, Uncle Keith! I went to that movie last night, wanna hear about it?" Waiting for no reply, in four minutes he choppily covered Charlie's dilemma, family, luck, tour of the chocolate factory, and his ultimate reward. "I thought a friend would be there so I kept looking an' when it was more'n half over I found him. Next week he'll probably be there again."

Keith felt a twinge of jealousy. Kenter couldn't be bereft of boy-lovers. Kenny was so openly friendly and attractive that the possibility was enormous that he could attract others of Keith's persuasion. Still, Keith thought, Kenny didn't seem to feel disloyal to this phantom friend as he warmly chatted about the evening.

Abruptly, Kenny said, "Do you live in an apartment? Wait. Don't say anything. Yes, you do. It's only a small building, probably only a handful of apartments. You probably have a garage, too, an' that's where you store your canoe and camping junk. Right?" Then he giggled.

"Well, kiddo, are a dozen apartments a handful? And yes, I do have a—"

"Next Tuesday we're all going to my Grandpa's for Fourth of July, an' that night we're going to a fireworks display. BANG! Bang-bang! Bang-bang-BANG!"

"Sounds like fun. Where's your—"

“HEY! I’ve got a pad an’ pencil. What’s your address and phone?”

Keith told him Donn’s, as arranged, said that Donn was his roommate. “Funny, I thought you’d ask me for them. Do you always interrupt people when they—”

“Never!” The boy laughed, and as he spoke Keith could tell he was still grinning. “I had to. About the address. If you stopped calling I’d need some way to contact you. I’d just call an’ reverse the charges! Of course, I could write, but you might not answer. An’ if I rode my bike to Scranton, I could stop in an’ meet you.”

“Almost two hundred miles, and through Pennsylvania mountains? You must think you’re muscle-bound to be strong enough for such a trip.” Keith made light of this, but this boy did make him feel wanted.

“You’ve never seen me. I’ve got lots of muscles, an’ they’re all in the right places!” Keith nodded agreement. This time the boy laughed almost hysterically. Through his laughter, he continued, “I rode my bike twenty-five miles Wednesday. I’m practicing up!” Then, spinning off on a new tangent, he asked, “Where do you work?”

Keith’s answer came easily. “At the Lyons and Apengel Industrial Supply Company, LAISCO for short. You know what? They have a branch plant up there in your neck of the woods. Ever hear of Newbury?”

“Sure. I’ve been there lots. My grandmother lives there, an’ it’s bigger than Kenter. A ten minute trip if you go over the speed limit. In a car, of course!”

Keith felt new pangs of distress as he thought of this lovely boy often being in his own community. “I didn’t know about it until today. My boss came to me and said they were having some production problems, and he thought they might have to send me up there to see what’s wrong—”

The boy interrupted, interest in Keith’s job relinquished. “Great! If you came up, you could see me, an’ I could see if you’re tall or short or green or purple or wear business suits

or funny clothes an' I could show you around Kenter an' maybe convince you to take me on that canoe trip with your nephew since I've never been to Canada an' you could meet my friend an' meet my Mom too an' so"—pausing only to suck in his breath—"what kinds of games do you like? Don't you think it's important to figure out someone else's game plan, like in something like war games, for instance?"

Keith couldn't keep up with the boy. "WAIT! Slow down! Fact number one: I'm not sure I can come, since it depends on my boss. Fact number two: I'm making no promises about the canoe trip, since my nephew starts football practice early in August so he can't go." Keith didn't know himself if he could arrange it, since he was an unknown person to Kenny's mother. "And number three: your mother may not want to meet me. She'll probably think I'm a nut or—"

"A child molester, *Uncle Keith*?"

Keith gulped. He started to say something when the boy again cut in.

"Dungeons and dragons. Thinking or strategy games, those are the ones I like. Chess too. I play lots of games with my cousin."

"Well, I—"

"She won't."

"*Who* won't?" Keith's head was spinning.

"My mom. I'll have it all set up. I'm good at that. Not to worry. She'll love you. When are you coming?"

Keith felt weak. *Didn't this boy listen?* "I told you, I'm not sure. In a couple of weeks, possibly."

Kenny sounded dejected. "Well... all right." Then he brightened. "It's been fun. I've got some great ideas."

"What's been fun? You mean—"

"HEY! I'm going to the town movie next week. They're showing *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. I think they're charging a dollar for their 'free' movie, because they're trying to make money for the Rotary Club's service projects,

an' the movie is costing them a bundle. One of my *other* uncles belongs to Rotary, an' he told me. Wish you could be there...."

"So do I, Kenny."

"Leave work early!"

"Can't. Sorry. To get there on time I'd have to leave work at noon, and I'm needed here. And it's much too far. If the trip didn't wear me out, *you* would." Keith began to wonder how this pretense would end. It had taken a direction he hadn't anticipated.

The boy was undismayed. "That's okay. I'll be thinking of you."

"And me, you. I'm getting to like you a lot." Keith almost said "love". "Next week I'll call again, same time, same place."

"I know that. About you liking me, that is. Wonderful! Bye!" Keith heard the boy laughing as he hung up.

He couldn't move. This boy continued to exhaust him, haunt him, day and night, always in his thoughts.

KEITH FAILED TO REACH Donn until the following Thursday. "Donn! Where have you been? I've been calling all week."

"I went to Chicago for Independence Day and stayed an extra day. I forgot to tell you, as you always talk so much about Kenny. Anything new happening?"

"Wow! Lots and lots. First of all....," and Keith relayed the news about the movie and the phone call. "But something really peculiar occurred yesterday. When I got home from work, in the hall by the door to my apartment, I found a box of Kuddly Kub Kookies! I almost flipped I was so mystified. Mrs. Tepplin in the next apartment heard me come in. She brought over a parcel that had been delivered for me, and as we talked I discovered she also received cookies. Thought everyone did. Said that a boy delivered them as part of a promotional campaign for the company.

He gave her quite a sales pitch!"

"Well, they're new on the market. Promotions are *common*, but I suppose it reminded *you* of Kenny."

"Right! I asked her to describe the boy. All she could remember was she thought he was a very serious teenager. But with *sandy*-colored hair!"

"Shot you down?" Donn was amused.

"In a way. Guess it was just a conditioned response. It must be a symbolic event of the 'great plan', something to give me encouragement."

"Superstition again," Donn scolded. "That reminds me. A letter came today addressed to you. The return address shows the name of 'K. McKee'. Anyone you know?"

"Donn! Open it, open it, quick! Read it!"

"Well now, where *did* I put that thing? Ah, here it is. Hmm..."

"Yes? What's he say? Stop torturing me!"

"Here goes: 'Dear Uncle Keith'—'uncle' is underlined—'You don't know what I look like. I thought I would send a picture so when you come here you can find me. Especially if it's late and it's dark. This picture is the only one I could find. Sorry it's in black and white. That's good for my hair, which is black. My shirt is tan and my bike is brown. Are you going to send me a picture, too?' It's signed, 'Love, your OTHER nephew, Kenny'. There's a postscript. 'The K-N Rec got unexpected new help. Now it's not krummy. Except sometimes when we eat!' "

Keith was ecstatic. "What's the picture show?"

"He's sitting on his bicycle. I see what you mean about those shorts. He *is* nice... ahhh... but he's shirtless! Perhaps he sent the wrong picture. You said his bike is blue?"

"I did. It is—unless he was riding a borrowed bike. But a blue one was on his porch, too."

"Perhaps one or the other of you is colorblind."

"That makes no difference. Maybe his blue bike is new, and the picture shows his old brown one. But he signed it

'love'! He's getting excited about someone he thinks he's never seen, only talked to a couple of times on the phone. But what does the postscript mean? That 'K-N Rec' sounds vaguely familiar, but I can't place it. Unless it's something Kenny mentioned once and I've forgotten. He's cryptic at times, you know."

"Would it help if I told you he's spelled 'krummy' with a 'K', not a 'C'?"

"Anyone could do that—especially a kid. But I've got a bigger problem. My original intention in this ploy was to 'accidentally' dial his number every so often, and if it worked out that I got to 'know' him a bit, I could ultimately—September maybe—be 'transferred' to the LAISCO plant in Newbury, 'move' there, and then arrange to meet him. Now he's pushing to meet me as soon as possible!"

"Keith, calm down. I've got an idea. When you do arrange to meet him, I could visit you and you could use my car with its Pennsylvania license plates. You could say you borrowed it because the gas mileage was better. Then you could 'move' to Newbury at a later date."

"That would be a godsend. Really it would. But be ready—it might have to be soon."

"That's fine with me. I'd like to do some 'spying' on this boy myself—now that I've seen his picture—if you don't mind..."

THIS TIME KEITH took along an old sleeping bag. After surveying the area, he selected a spot near the periphery of where the audience would soon congregate, and far to the rear. It was to the side of one of the many old maples which dotted the three-acre park. He wore the same hat, shirt, and vest as the previous week, sported lightly tinted sunglasses, and carried a book in which he could feign interest while surreptitiously searching for Kenny. As the crowd increased and shadows deepened into night, Keith again feared he might fail to see Kenny. The night was uncommonly warm,

and Keith regretted his heavy clothing.

Suddenly he heard boy voices coming from the other side of his tree. Two boys came into view and stopped not ten feet in front of him. One was Kenny; the other could have been his twin if he had darker hair. They began to argue over where to lay their blanket. Kenny wanted to cross to the other side, but the other boy—Kenny called him “Tim”—wanted to stay there.

“Look,” Tim said, “it’s starting. We have to stay here, at least to the break.”

Keith pulled down the brim of his hat and furtively watched them as they opened their blanket and placed it under the tree, overlapping part of his sleeping bag. The boys entirely ignored his presence, never once glanced at him. Now, dressed only in brief gym shorts and scuffed jogging shoes, the boys settled in to watch the screen, altering their positions from time to time.

Keith noticed they were totally immodest in assuming poses which, since they wore nothing underneath, revealed parts of their anatomies which boys normally keep concealed. Keith didn’t object, although he noticed that his heartbeat was strong and irregular. So close, he could have reached out and touched them, but he had to keep reminding himself that he was a S-T-R-A-N-G-E-R.

When the intermission came, the area was submerged in semidarkness as the screen lights vanished, for the only light came from dim street lamps at the perimeter of the park and from the refreshment stands, far to the other side. The boys began talking about how they regretted having brought money only for the movie, nothing for a snack. Keith, trusting in his disguise, the darkness, and his ability to lower his voice, said, “If you go over and get me some popcorn and hot chocolate, you can get something for yourselves, too,” and he offered them a five-dollar bill. He hoped this would stay any desire they might have to desert their benefactor.

The boys snapped their faces toward each other, grinned,

twitched their bodies in excitement, and said, "ALL RIGHT!" in unison. They snatched the money and took off, running and hopping through the audience still seated on the ground.

Shortly they returned. They were balancing, on two flimsy paper trays, three large containers of popcorn, Keith's hot chocolate, and four cans of soda for themselves. They laid everything out on the blanket, and Tim looked toward Keith and spoke. "There was twenty-five cents change, but it accidentally got dropped inside your box. It'll turn up." Both boys laughed. "Oh yes. Thanks!"

Kenny joined in. "Yeah. Me too! Thanks!"

For a few minutes the boys slurped their drinks and nibbled popcorn. After he finished his first can of soda, Tim announced that he intended to save the other can until later.

Kenny agreed. Then he said, "I gotta pee!"

"Me, too!"

Both boys got up and disappeared to the other side of the tree, from which came the tinkling sound characteristic of this activity. Keith gave a start when he saw they had pushed their shorts *down* for this task, for when they reappeared both were shaking their appropriate appendages. Keith was simultaneously delighted and dismayed. He prayed the darkness protected them from notice—unless these uninhibited youths were known for such antics and found forgiveness in the community.

They re-positioned themselves on the blanket and began to talk. Keith listened intently, loving the music of their voices. First they began talking about some other children, friends and non-friends, when Kenny said that he had a special friend whom he had never seen. Tim inquired about him, and Kenny went on to briefly explain the strange coincidences which led to the friendship.

"Do you like him?" Tim wondered.

"Sure I do. We both like to play games, an' go camping an' stuff, an' he's gonna take me on a canoe trip later on this

summer—way up to a big park in Canada—since his real nephew can't go." He became effusive as he twisted to kneel before Tim and gestured wildly. "Then he's going to get his job transferred to Newbury so he can live there an' be near me, so he can take me lots of places. He likes boys. He lives in Pennsylvania with a guy called Donn who likes boys too."

Keith's heart thumped heavily and his eyes opened wide.

"Hey! Do you think I could go on the canoe trip? I love camping and swimming, and I bet I could learn how to canoe real fast."

Kenny was confident. "Sure. My Uncle Keith's a great guy. I always call him 'uncle'. That's who he said he was when he first called me. He's coming up next weekend, you know. We'll both get a chance to meet him. Just don't you try an' take him away from me, or I'll fight you for him!"

"Oh yeah?" Tim pushed Kenny, Kenny pushed back. The pushing erupted into a wrestling free-for-all. Keith watched, entranced. Fighting over *him*? During their mock struggle each sometimes tugged on the other's shorts, partially exposing boy posteriors. On the several occasions when this happened, each would reach down and pull them up again, constantly laughing, knowing no embarrassment. Keith cautiously looked around and saw neighboring moviegoers observe the scuffle and smile. He felt "caught", yet suppressed any desire to detach himself from the boys.

The intermission ended, the movie was on. Overheated, Keith removed his vest while the boys resumed viewing positions. Kenny flopped on his belly obliquely in front of Keith, his toes idly touching the tree roots to Keith's left, his shorts halfway over his rump. Tim lay on his side at right angles to Kenny, his rib cage across Kenny's thighs, arm making a triangle to support his head. As the movie progressed he moved his hand around under Kenny's shorts until eventually he had slid them entirely down, exposing the boy's buttocks. Kenny made no objection; his rapt attention was on the screen. Tim apparently had a divided interest.

Keith could see the boy's shorts half off as well as the bulge which revealed an obvious erection. After a while Tim shifted, curled, and, using Kenny's bare butt for a pillow, now viewed the screen sideways. Keith placed his entire trust in the movie's excitement. Surely, if the action flagged, boredom would cause some to glance around. Keith checked to be sure that no one sat behind them.

Eventually Keith's anxiety about that evaporated, as a new source of palpitation supplanted it. Keith was sitting with his legs crossed, yoga position. Kenny rolled over, pushed Tim away, wriggled back partially into his shorts, twisted to lay his head on Keith's inner knee and calf, and stretched himself out before him.

"Tim," he whispered. "Here, use a pillow."

Tim appraised the situation, then joined him. "Much better," he said, snuggling in next to Kenny.

Keith practically suffered apoplexy. Two delightful boys, each with his head in his lap, almost naked, top bands of their shorts scarcely restraining disclosure of their genitals, and treating him as if he were an inanimate pillow! Occasionally, one or the other of them would reach back with an outside arm as if stretching and touch Keith on his leg or knee. From time to time one of them would touch his hand to the other's abdomen or rub it gently. Both boys frequently reached under their own shorts to scratch, Keith thought, or to re-arrange boy paraphernalia.

In this long-sustained position Keith's back began to ache, but he dared not destroy the magic. Imperceptibly he bent forward and edged his arms to his lap. Reaching under each head, he ran his fingers through their long hair. Then, cautiously encircling their necks, he gently slid his hands over the soft skin of their shoulders, stopping on Kenny's right and Tim's left breast plate. *You shouldn't be doing this!* his severe mind reprimanded, but his heart urged wild abandon. Yet, the boys lay still, indicated no objection, no uneasiness.

"That okay?" Keith whispered. "I've got to rest my back."

Each boy gave a slight nod of assent. The spacecraft on the screen was about to land, but Keith was in another world, involved with his own "close encounter". Without warning Kenny moved both his hands up, pulled Keith's hand to the center of his chest and began to caress it and fondle his fingers. More than a tightness stirred in Keith's groin. Tim did the same thing, next flattened Keith's hand and pulled it around his chest. Keith took over and lightly massaged him. Meanwhile, Kenny had moved Keith's hand to his lips, kissed it, and touched his tongue to the thumb. This eroticism affected more than just Keith alone; he could see the outline of their erections pushing against the fabric of their shorts. Each had pulled up his legs so the area remained in the shadow, hidden from all but Keith.

The spaceship ascended, the movie ended, and again the park was mottled night. Both boys released Keith's hands, rolled away, and once more became oblivious to his presence.

"Kenny—I forgot to finish my popcorn."

"So did I."

Both boys noisily crunched their snack. Keith remained motionless. He couldn't collect his sleeping bag as the boys were still on it, but he didn't want to leave. He noticed that he himself had hardly touched his popcorn, but decided to take it home as a souvenir of the evening. The boys opened the remaining cans and glugged down soda between pieces of popcorn, dawdling. The crowd rapidly dispersed, the refreshment stands stood dark, and workers carted away projector and giant screen, leaving the park deserted save for the lone man and the two boys. Finally, the boys arose. Kenny took the empty cans and cartons to a trash barrel while Tim rolled their blanket. Their prankishness and energy undiminished, they headed for the side street—where Keith, he realized with some concern, had parked his van—

shoving, laughing, skipping, chasing, joking. Keith felt both sad and elated. He rolled his sleeping bag to follow them at a reasonable distance, could detect the faint aroma of boy urine as he left the tree. If he hadn't started this false business, he conjectured, he could have spoken openly to the boys that night.

But the evening wasn't over. Keith thought he heard an argument ahead, and he cautiously moved closer. The boys had stopped near the edge of the park, five yards from his van. Soon, approaching through deep shadow, he could clearly hear their voices.

"Okay, if I can wrestle you out of your shorts, you have to walk home naked. The same for me." Keith was uncertain which boy spoke. They laid out the blanket, kicked off their shoes, and charged each other. It didn't last long. After several minutes of vivacious grappling, both boys had succeeded in their desired objective, but they continued to roll and twist their bodies against each other. Their exhaustion ended it. Each rolled over on his back, panting, and Keith, whose eyes had adjusted to the dim light, saw each flaunted an erection.

"You gave me a hard-on!" It was Kenny.

"You gave me one too!" This evoked mutual merriment.

The boys sat up, collected their belongings, and hobbled over to Keith's van, leaning their buttocks against the driver's door, resting, trying to catch their breaths.

"Bet you can't walk all the way home," Tim challenged Kenny, "with a hard-on!"

"Bet I can, bet you can't."

"Ten cents?"

"You're on. No shoes, either. It's naked all the way!"

The boys tossed their shorts and shoes into the blanket, rolled it up, and after Kenny placed the bundle on his shoulder the pair started off. As Keith gingerly approached his van, his legs scarcely supported him. Inside, he started the engine and watched the boys move away. *How far?* he

wondered. *Two hundred? Three hundred feet? Far enough.* He turned on his headlights.

They gave no hint of noticing as the bright beams disclosed two naked boys, insouciant, ambling home after an invigorating evening....

AS SOON AS KEITH got home he was on the phone. "Donn, sorry it's so late. I just had to call and report this." And report he did, every particle of the evening that he could remember.

"Keith, this is *affecting* me..."

"I was there. It *really* affected *me!* Do you think he can actually read my mind? How could he possibly know *you* like boys? I've hardly mentioned your name to him! How can he be so certain that my job will 'be transferred' up here? Or that I'll visit him next week—which I fully intend to do, though, if you can come up."

"Perhaps he *can* read your mind. I sure will come up. I can scarcely wait! How about Thursday evening? That will give us a chance to visit on Friday. Incidentally, from the way those boys behaved in grasping your hands, uh..., do you think they attach themselves to any willing man?"

Keith spoke more softly. "It bothers me too. I'd hate to go through all this only to find I'm a diversion to satisfy his own 'unacceptable libidinous impulses'. Of course, Tim was probably the one he was looking for at the movie a week ago, not some rival man. I feel better about that. But I'd like an enduring relationship. Maybe Kenny's an opportunist. He practically promised Tim he can go along on a canoe trip I haven't even scheduled."

"You're in kind of deep, but I think it'll work out. Why don't you meet him next week, and after you get to know him tell him the whole story. He might be amused. He seems like a nice-enough kid. He'll accept your scheming because he likes you."

"Thanks, Donn. Good thinking. That is, as long as he

doesn't like every man who comes along."

Donn was sharp. "Stop worrying. Have faith in him!"

"Okay, Donn, I will. There's two boy butt-marks in the dust on the door of my van. Curious sight. I'll leave them there for posterity."

Donn laughed. "I hope that's not a pun. Anyway, when you call Kenny tomorrow, ask him if he remembers what *Close Encounters* was all about!"

WHEN KEITH CALLED, Kenny was jubilant.

"I've got so *many* things to tell you! First of all, last night at the movie I found my friend right away. Tim an' I were together all through it. He's here now. He's my cousin, too, an' you can talk with him in a while. It sure was hot in the park! We laid out our blanket away from most people so it'd be cooler and—"

Keith interrupted. "How was the movie?"

"Lots of fun. There was a guy who sat near us. He gave us some money for soda an' stuff during the intermission. I always keep my eyes open, though. I don't miss anything. I think he was a child molester! Tim thinks so too. We stayed away from him afterwards."

Keith felt hollow inside, thought it was a good thing that he hadn't "introduced" himself at the movie. Now how could he tell Kenny of the workings of his "plan"? Would Kenny then reject him?

Kenny was still talking. "I went on another twenty-five mile bike hike this week. Tim went with me. He got bushed. But pretty soon we'll be set to ride to Scranton, unless you come up here first."

"What do you mean, 'we'?"

"Tim an' me, of course. We'd ride there together. Did you get my letter? How'd you like my picture?"

"Yes, I got your picture. You're really attractive—"

"GREAT!"

"—and it was a real nice letter. Tell me, what's the K-N—?"

"HEY! Tim wants to talk to you."

Keith heard Tim grab the receiver. "Hello, Uncle Keith? This is Tim. Kenny says I can call you 'Uncle Keith' too."

"Hi, Tim. What do *you* look like?"

"Like Kenny, even nicer.' Keith heard both boys snicker. "Can I go on the canoe trip with you and Kenny? Can you swim naked up in those mountain lakes? Kenny says if he can, he wants to go. Actually, he wants to go anyway. So do I. Is your canoe yellow? Kenny says it is. Do you have a big enough sleeping bag for all three of us?"

Keith shook his head in disbelief. Was this boy as volatile as Kenny? A clone, perhaps? "I'm sure you're nice, Tim, and I'm sure it would be great to have you along on a trip. However, until—"

Kenny retrieved the receiver but spoke to Tim. "That's enough. Yes yes yes! Yes to everything! I told you he was a wonderful guy." Then to Keith: "Tim will be here when you come next Saturday. It's better if you come in the morning. Tim spends the night here lots of times. Get here around ten o'clock so we can spend the whole day together."

Keith couldn't disobey this tyrant. "Well, Kenny, you're lucky. They *are* sending me up there next week. Donn said I could borrow his Toyota for the trip—better gas mileage, you know. I'll stay at a motel in Newbury."

The boys cheered, then laughed gleefully. Keith felt thrilled that their anticipation of his visit made them so elated. He also felt joy, but it was mixed with increasing apprehension.

When the boys regained their composure, Kenny said, "You know, Uncle Keith, you may get a surprise when you visit me. You don't know me very well. Everyone says I'm unpredictable and incomprehensible as well. And Tim is getting to be just as bad, too. He spends too much time with me!"

"You can't intimidate me," Keith lied. "I'm what is called 'unflappable'. It means—"

"I know what it means. I'll explain it to Tim. He'll agree that you'll be as 'flappable' as they come, even though there's no such word. But we'll be unflappable, you'll see!"

Keith heard sounds of merriment on the line. Perhaps, he thought, there was no need to worry after all; he felt a bit smug as he anticipated their surprise when he would tell them how he had schemed the whole thing to meet Kenny.

"You don't smoke. Right?" Its tenor was more statement than question.

"No. How do you—"

"You never cough. Next week, Uncle Keith, we're not going to the movie. It's one of those mushy pictures. Anyway, it probably's going to rain—I can predict weather too—so they'll show it in the school gym. It's not as dark or as much fun inside."

Keith felt relieved. It could be awkward if Donn wished to go to the movie and Kenny and Tim spotted them, especially indoors. "Good. You'll get to bed early and get a good night's sleep before our big day."

The boys howled at that suggestion, but managed to say their goodbyes. Just as Keith lowered the receiver to hang up he heard Kenny's yell: "We'll have the last piece—" A click, and he was gone.

Keith remained where he sat and stared at his reflection in his blank television screen. What, he asked himself, did he mean by that? Would he ever understand this puzzling imp?

IT DID RAIN. Clouds thickened Thursday afternoon, and the high winds and heavy rains delayed Donn's arrival until far past dark.

"Hi Keith!" Donn called as he dashed from his car. "My brief vacation won't be much pleasure with this rain and gloom."

Keith agreed. "Perhaps Kenny controls the heavens, too. God knows he controls me. Could be he controls everyone around him. Come on in. This storm has gotten to me, too.

Hungry?"

Inside, Keith removed some food from the refrigerator and made sandwiches and coffee. As they ate, the two men sat and discussed these strange but delightful boys who enchanted them both.

"This the popcorn they 'delivered' for you?" Donn asked as he picked up the container from the table and shook it a bit. "It rattles. What's in it?"

"Probably the change they owed me. Empty it and see."

Donn did so. Twenty-five pennies clattered into the bowl, mixed in with the popcorn. Donn stared at Keith. Keith returned the stare, shaking his head.

"What is this? Are both these kids nuts? I could have bitten into one of those in the dark!"

"Relax, Keith. You're just jumpy with thoughts of meeting them soon. I think the pennies were all on the bottom of the box and they fell through the popcorn as I dumped it."

"But maybe Kenny has—what's it called?—childhood schizophrenia! Every time I call he giggles and laughs! He jumps from one topic to another! Why does he always avoid answering my questions? Why does he always interrupt me when I'm talking? I love him dearly—I'm obsessed by him—but now I'm getting scared of where this is leading me!"

Donn tried to comfort him. He knew that it would be far too easy to succumb to the flirtations and advances of this seductive boy, for if he really were disturbed and responded by feeling guilty about his actions, Kenny would be held blameless if it came out in the open. Especially since Keith had made the first phone call, easily determined to be false. It wouldn't go well for Keith, especially were it discovered that he had "disguised" himself and was with them in the park. Too many ready witnesses around saw him.

After talking until quite late, Donn suggested that they get some sleep, that the situation might appear more benign in the morning. Keith took him to the guest room.

"You'll probably sleep okay, Donn. I don't think I will.

I'm too morose."

FRIDAY BEGAN BRIGHTER, but as the morning progressed the sky darkened, bringing drizzle, then a steady rain. But Keith *had* slept and it helped him, and his optimism returned as again he talked with Donn about their mutual interest. Keith often gazed at Kenny's picture and re-read his letter Donn had brought.

"But I still can't decipher this 'K-N Rec'."

"Got a phone book? I've an idea."

"Sure, here. What you looking for?"

"Just 'K' and there, 'Kenter'. Now, 'Kenter-Newbury'. Aha! There it is: 'Kenter-Newbury Youth Recreation Association'. Looks like a volunteer organization. Know anything about it?"

"No. Kenny never mentioned it. He must have thought he had. You know how his mind skips around. Maybe he goes there."

Donn smiled. "At least it's not crummy. With a 'K'."

"Tell you what, Donn. Let's drive over to Kenter this afternoon. I'll show you around, so you won't have to only visualize where my escapades took place."

"Sure! Return to the scene of the crime, so to speak?"

About noon Keith decided to shower. Donn answered the phone when it rang, hurried to the bathroom door. "Keith! Phone!" he yelled over the sound of the shower. "It sounds urgent. A guy just called, growled your last name, asked if you were here. He's angry about something."

Keith, dripping, wrapped himself in a towel and got on the line. The caller's voice was so loud that Donn could also hear him. "You the snake-in-the-grass who's been botherin' my brother? Don't deny it! Callin' 'im up, spyin' on 'im, tryin' tuh mess with 'im? He wrote me all about it. He don't lie, neither! What's *wrong* with you anyway, buster?"

Keith tried to speak but couldn't move his lips, sheer terror manifest in his face. He saw sudden destruction as his

world crashed down around him. The voice went on. "Nuthin' tuh say, huh? Yuh better leave 'im alone, or I'll come tuh St. Louis and cream yuh!"

Donn wrenched the phone out of Keith's petrified hand. "This isn't St. Louis! Where're you calling?" The man spoke more softly and Keith couldn't hear him. "No, his first name is Keith, not Roger. *This* is area code 716, not 816. You either dialed wrong or the information operator mixed it up.... No, it's not.... I must have misunderstood when you said his last name.... Yes, it's very similar.... All right.... That's all right. Mistakes do happen.... I'll tell him.... You just shocked him, that's all. He's been under a lot of pressure lately.... Okay, goodbye." Donn turned his attention to Keith, collapsed on the couch. "False alarm, Keith. He was very apologetic. I'm sorry I didn't correctly hear the name. Seems these area codes *can* get switched. Coincidence. I know, coincidence piled on coincidence. Life is like that, sometimes. Better finish shaving so we can eat and go on our drive."

DONN WAS THE FIRST to spot it, halfway between the villages — the Kenter-Newbury Youth Recreation Association.

"That's why I never saw it," Keith remarked. "The sign is way back off the road. Doesn't look like they have much business today with this rain." Keith felt better now, having recuperated from the trauma of the call. The shock of it at first obliterated his knowledge that Kenny had no older brother; even if he had, Kenny wouldn't have known Keith's phone number to give to him. Since the coincidence still bothered him, he thought possibly that guilt was preying on him. Or the uncertainty of the whole enterprise. But as he dwelt upon thoughts of the Kenny he believed he really knew and of his wish for a fulfilling future, he was happier.

They visited the shrines: the supermarket, the hill where he had seen Kenny on his bike; the park; they drove by Kenny's house. "See, there on the porch! Am I colorblind?"

What color *is* his bike?" Keith had slowed his van so Donn could see it.

"Sure enough, Keith. It's blue, blue like your van...."

When they got back to Newbury they considered the following day's big event. Again and again Donn warned Keith to use constant restraint. To be friendly, find out as much as possible about them, try to impress his mother, but above all to avoid physical contact.

"Keith, I know you too well, and this is risky business. You've got to make a solemn vow that you will not touch either of them. I insist. Too much is at stake. Come on, *now...*"

"Yes, but what if, what if—"

"No exceptions. Promise *NOW!*"

"All right, but this pains me... 'I promise faithfully that I will not, not, *not* touch either of them, so help me God!' There. Satisfied?"

KEITH APPEARED to leisurely ascend the porch steps; he was outwardly calm but inwardly in turmoil. All the way from Newbury he had assured himself that he was invincible, that Kenny and Tim would fail to manipulate him, but now uncertainty troubled him. Just as he was about to press the bell button, the door opened. The woman who appeared there whispered, just audibly, "Are you Keith?"

Keith nodded. The woman stepped onto the porch and eased the door shut. Keith clenched his fists. *What's going on now?* he thought, panicking. He considered racing back to the car.

Her voice remained low. "I've wanted to meet you for so long now, but Kenny said you've been very busy. I wanted to talk with you before you saw the boys. Oh, yes—I'm Mrs. McKee. Karen. I know they are *awfully* persuasive, but I don't want you pressured into anything you don't want."

Keith muttered an insipid reply.

She went on. "I can't begin to thank you for the influence

you've had on them ever since you volunteered your help at the K-N Rec. They didn't much like it there before you arrived. Kenny and Tim have been so involved in this great mysterious project you got them started on! They won't tell me what it's all about, but it really has invigorated them this summer."

Again, Keith tried, "Well, I..." Then he realized there was nothing he could say that would make much sense.

"Kenny doesn't say much about it, so you probably don't know he lost his father in a hunting accident about three years ago. We lived in Binghamton at the time, but we moved back home to Kenter about four months ago. Kenny's problem is he's too smart. They've kept him in the right grade for his age at school, but they assign him all sorts of special work so he won't be bored. He's too fast for kids his age, generally, so they end up rejecting him. He started hanging around with some older boys for a while, but I thought they were pretty crude, and he was beyond them, too. But Kenny's a playful and sensitive boy. They didn't do him any good."

Keith's muddled mind tried to absorb all these details and fit them into what he knew of Kenny's actions. He meekly nodded, smiled faintly.

The woman continued. "Anyway, until you took an interest, I was quite worried about Kenny. You must really know how to handle him. Tim, too. Both Kenny and Tim are so excited about the canoe trip you promised them. They've been getting out books about camping, writing to Ontario for information—brochures and maps—that anyone could think *they* were planning the trip, not *you!*"

Keith raised his eyebrows. "I'm sure they'll have a great time." He finally committed himself to it. "That is, uh, if it's okay they can go."

"Oh, definitely. Tim's mother is so glad, too. She's really anxious to meet you. You've certainly impressed her. Tim's so much happier now, and he's always talking about you at

home, telling her about all the things you do together at the K-N Rec. His parents are divorced, you know, and his father moved out to the west coast, so he never sees him. It's too bad you don't live here rather than in Newbury, for they could see you more often."

Suddenly Keith realized that they had fabricated his existence as a local person, not some distant stranger. This Kenny was a genius! And Kenny was right—he *had* fixed everything with his mother, and with Tim's mother, too. Keith relaxed somewhat, his heart permeated with joy.

"But you know, Keith, they truly idolize you. I've had a hard time keeping up with Kenny, but you really have helped. He said you both like mind games. He's nuts over puzzles." Then she slowed a bit. "They're upstairs. I'm sure they know you're here. I swear that Kenny's clairvoyant. But I have to tell you this so you won't be shocked. Bill—my late husband—and I were always pretty liberal in raising him, both the children. Our back yard is enclosed, and the boys have taken to sun-bathing out there." She hesitated. "To get a whole body tan. They said they expected that most of the time they'd be skinny-dipping on the trip, and they 'didn't want their butts burned off' during it. I try to restrict them to the house and yard, but sometimes... they're so rambunctious, and they get carried away..." Her voice trailed off. Then she brightened. "So they may be a bit different than they are at the K-N, but I just wanted to warn you. Thanks again for helping my boy."

She opened the door to let Keith in. The stairway began behind the door. "Just go right up. They'll hear you come. I've got to get back to the kitchen."

Keith started up, but his legs felt as if they were lifting feet of lead. His heart was suffocating under his mind's demand: *No touching. No touching. No touching.* When he was half way up, the boys came charging out of a room and down the stairs. Kenny flung himself bodily at Keith and almost toppled them both, legs gripping Keith's waist, arms clutching

his shoulders. Keith's vow shattered. When Tim grabbed Keith's arm and pulled him up the stairs, his lead feet transformed themselves to balsa. "In here! In here!" He pushed Keith, still carrying Kenny, into the bedroom. Both boys were ecstatic.

Kenny slid down. "I'm Kenny. That's Tim. Can you be UNCLE KEITH? Oh here, sit down." They wriggled and squirmed with the exuberance of pixies as they pushed him into a desk chair. "We did it! We won!" They kept their voices down, as if not wishing to broadcast this fact even while quivering with excitement. Keith's breath was spasmodic; he couldn't speak. The boys were nude, as Kenny's mother had warned. Both were goldenly tanned.

"Get it, Tim! No, I'll get it!" Kenny kneeled down and fished for something under the bed, then went to Keith and straddled his knee, accompanied by Tim, who sat on the other knee, likewise facing Keith. "I've got a present for you. It's the *last* piece!" They bobbed up and down, scarcely containing themselves. "Of the *PUZZLE!*" they squealed.

Keith took the wrapped package. The size and weight seemed vaguely familiar. "Open it! Open it!" the boys cried in unison.

A slight light began to glimmer in Keith's head. He trembled. His words were feeble, hesitant. "Before I do, what... what did you win? What... what puzzle?"

"The bet! I bet Tim I could get you here within two months time, but then he helped me it was so much fun. But six weeks...! Open it!"

A shiver migrated down Keith's back. He ripped the tissue. The glimmer in his head exploded into a ball of light. He held a box of Kuddly Kub Kookies!

The boys watched him, rasping with glee. Through his daze Keith heard Kenny pour out the whole account. "I saw you look at me that day before you made the U-turn. Told you I don't miss anything! In the store I saw you sneaking looks at me, an' that got me interested. But at the checkout

after, uh, you dropped the box, I couldn't do anything. I mean, except signal you, but then I didn't know if I should have. I was still mixed up with all that kids say and with what they drum into us at school. It's a good thing I could talk to Tim about it." He smiled knowingly. "An' because I had to carry all their junk, I forgot to get your van plate number, but Tim helped me look for you. We got lucky when we swished by you on our bikes two weeks later."

Keith weakly forced out his words: "How would my van license help you?"

"My aunt works at the Department of Motor Vehicles. She traced the plate number and got me your name, address, birth date, an' of course I knew your van's color. That's how I could 'read' your mind. When you telephoned me that first night, I was kinda slow on the uptake, since I should've recognized your name. But that 'Scranton' business threw me for a minute. Your call helped a lot, you know, for me to hang on to you. I was trying to figure out some way to meet you, but so you wouldn't think I was too anxious. We kept the game going for so long...!"

"But how *did* you know it was me, since you were about to hang up?"

The boys shook with mirth. "Because you said, 'Okay, kiddo, no problem.'"

"How would that...?"

"The same thing you said after they pushed me into you at the store! But since I thought you wanted to play a game, I decided to play my own. I had a *great plan* all along! Didn't you?"

Keith wilted at this revelation. "A great... great plan? Then your bike hikes were to Newbury—"

"Sure!" Tim now spoke. "The second time I delivered the 'sample' boxes of cookies, but we had to buy four boxes so everyone in your section would get one. It cost us some, too. And we saw your yellow canoe. You really ought to lock your garage."

"An' I was looking for you during the first movie. I saw you go for popcorn an' tailed you. Through the second half I sat right *behind* you... you in that funny hat that *anyone* could spot a mile away, an' you didn't even know it!" Kenny again began laughing.

"Before *Close Encounters* Kenny didn't really want to move to the other side. We had that all set up, too. We had cased the place to see where you were, then we moved in." The boys' eyes sparkled. Keith relived those moments in the park, even while he now caressed their arms, hips, and legs, luxuriating in the sensation of velvet boy skin covering warm boy muscle.

"After I wrote that silly letter I called LAISCO to ask if you worked there, an' they also told me they had no plant in Scranton. Did you find the pennies?"

"Yes, you monkeys. Good thing I didn't bite into one of them." Keith took several deep breaths. "But how did you know I didn't actually have a nephew?"

Kenny snapped his fingers at Tim, then pointed. Tim jumped up, went out to the hall, and returned with a long-corded telephone. Keith watched Kenny dial area code 617, then his own exchange and number. A recording came on: "The number you have dialed is not presently assigned to any customer."

Keith slowly shook his head. "Oh, God...."

Tim spoke again. "Kenny figured that Donn likes boys because he had to help you in your game plan and you had to tell him everything." During their excited prattle both boys unconsciously reached down to stroke their genitals, which produced the usual result. They noticed this simultaneously.

Kenny commented first. "We know *you* like boys. That's because—"

"I had a friend, a man," Tim broke in, "before Kenny moved here. We loved each other a lot. We did all kinds of things together—especially in bed—but he had to leave for a job in New Orleans. We still write. I even wrote him all about

our great plan. But *I* had to break Kenny in. He's smarter than I am, but *I* had a few things *I* could teach *him*. That's how *he* knew when he first saw you."

"That's why we're partners."

"There's something we're sorry about," Tim said. "Ashamed, I guess. It was my idea, but afterwards it seemed mean."

This was additional puzzlement for Keith. "What did?"

"The telephone call yesterday. I had this older kid do it on his lunch hour. We told him it was just a joke, but we didn't tell him who you were or your number. We dialed."

The pair fell from his lap as Keith abruptly stood up. "My God! I almost had a heart attack over that! I'd have been dead and I wouldn't have come here today!"

The boys laughed and righted themselves. They circled their arms around Keith's waist and hugged him; both acted genuinely sorry. "Please forgive us? But you said you were unflappable." Kenny reached his arms up, pulled Keith's head down and kissed him. "Please?"

Keith was overwhelmed. He kissed Kenny several times, then swung over and kissed Tim, who was equally responsive. "Of course, you little angels. Or devils! I can't get angry at you."

"Let's get dressed, Tim, so Uncle Keith can drive us to Newbury and we can meet Donn. Wondering how we know he's there?" Kenny continued, responding to Keith's quizzical look. "We called his house in Scranton on Thursday night and again Friday morning and night. Since we got no answer, we knew he was gone. Anyway, you've got his car. We saw you drive up. What do you think, Tim?"

"Sure. After we meet Donn, then *you* can take us out to lunch, Uncle Keith, to pay us back for all those cookies we had to buy. Is it okay if we don't call you 'uncle' any more?"

Keith wondered how he would ever outfox these boys. They seemed to have calmed down some, but wild emotions still churned inside him. A bit later, Keith bid a temporary

farewell to Kenny's mother, the boys piled together into the bucket seat in Donn's car, and they headed for Newbury.

Kenny again took over as master planner. "We have to start preparing for the canoe trip. We got stuff from Ontario showing canoe routes, camp sites, hiking trails, maps, everything. Donn can come along on the trip, too, if he wants to. But you might have to get another canoe, or else rent one. Then we'll have to decide on when we're going, and make equipment lists, figure out what we've got to—"

Keith looked down at Kenny and their eyes met. "Kenny..., ah..."

"I know, Uncle Keith. Keith, I mean. It's time, I guess, for you to do most of the important planning. I quit."

"Not entirely, Kenny. We can plan together, now. With Tim, too."

"Great! Because I've got another brainstorm. How do you like this?" and he told them his idea.

"Brilliant!" Tim shouted. "Keith, is it all right, please? *Please?*"

Keith hesitated, then looked down at their expectant faces. "I shouldn't, but you're so persuasive, so okay...."

The boys shrieked with excitement, and Kenny ordered, "Stop at a store first, Keith!"

WHEN THEY ARRIVED at the apartment building, the trio entered Keith's section and tiptoed down the hall, past his door. Keith stood hidden where he could observe the consequences of the plan. The boys kicked off their footwear, moved back to the apartment door, placed their half-dozen cartons of Kuddly Kub Kookies on the floor, and quickly checked around for any residents. No one.

Kenny whispered, "Okay, now!" They whipped off their shorts, flung them to Keith, picked up the cartons, and banged the door knocker. It seemed like an eternity to Keith, but within twenty seconds Donn opened the door.

Kenny and Tim, holding the boxes waist high, said to-

gether, "Sir, we're selling Kuddly Kubs, and we heard you might like some! They're pretty krummy!" Donn reeled backwards as the two squealing boys rushed in.

Keith picked up their sneakers and shorts and headed for the door. He shook his head slowly. "How am I going to live with these kids?" he muttered to himself. "They've led me right into a paradise of temptation...!"